

When Easter Follows Gruhapravesham Puja

2 formal religions in the family double the chances of a major, positive influence in life



By Amritha Alladi Joseph

Spring is a festive time for us. As a Hindu Tam Brahmin married to a Malayalee Catholic, I've had a busy few weeks, from Palm Sunday Mass to Tamil Puthandu puja. Last year, for the first time, I personally observed both of these and that's because I'm now working twice as hard to retain the culture and traditions that both of our parents have so diligently worked to preserve when they left behind everything they knew in India and took a chance coming to this country.

I've always felt a strong tie to my roots. During the last 30 years, my parents recreated here in the U.S. the cultural milieu they would have experienced back home, and I'm thankful they did. I enjoy participating in (most) of these traditions and the love for the Indian arts — music and dance, which are considered offerings to gods themselves — that they instilled in me have been one of the greatest gifts I've accepted.

I know my in-laws have done the same for my husband and his brothers, and he feels the same way. Therefore, now, after having gotten married and knowing that my husband and I will have to split our time in passing on whatever we have grasped of each of our two traditions to the next generation, I'm taking extra effort to observe the holidays from both sides, even if that means waking up at 6:30

a.m. on Easter morning to attend Mass before my husband has to go to work, or scrambling on a Friday evening after my work to put together manga pachadi with whatever ingredients I can find to ensure an auspicious Puthandu celebration.

The extra effort is necessary

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for three reasons:

One is that among my generation, there is less interest in following formal, organized religion, and increasingly people are identifying themselves as atheist. In 2016, the Pew Research Center reported in their Religious Landscape Study that millennials are far less likely than older Americans to pray or attend church regularly, or to consider religion an important part of their lives. Altogether, adults unaffiliated with religion comprise 23 percent of the adult population, an increase from 16 percent in 2007, and the overall adult population who believes in God has dropped from 92 percent to 89 percent, per the Pew study.

I can certainly understand and appreciate the reasons for this. I have no problem with that: each person is entitled to believe or not believe.

As New York University Professor of Sociology Michael Hout notes in an interview published by the Center, millennials, who were raised by the baby boomers, were taught to "find their own moral compass," and



this self-guided attitude may have caused them to depart from formalized religion.

However, since my husband and I have grown up in families where faith has played a major, positive influence, I would love for my future kids to have some sense of faith if I can help it. I want to give them the opportunity to experience the same traditions that I did, feel a similar connection to a higher power and reap the benefits that religion has to offer. I recognize much of this is not in my control since each person has to make his or her own decisions about faith and spirituality, but if it worked the way my parents instilled these feelings in me, then maybe I can

try a similar approach.

Two, as a woman, from what I have observed in Indian homes and read about across cultures, we are keepers of culture and tradition and are responsible for passing it on. That's not to say the men are not involved; from my experience, men are typically responsible for transmitting teachings from the scriptures and providing moral guidance. Yet for the day-to-day rituals and customs, it's going to be my task to get the kids to church and initiate the pujas at home. Some might say these rituals are not actually meaningful, and I agree these activities themselves may not bear any significance. But they are important because they

provide focus.

Life gets busy, so even though the rituals don't matter, they are tools to help us get focused. That's where women, who get their husbands and kids involved in the rituals, play a pivotal role.

Finally, since we are an inter-faith household, we have to work to impart not one, but two traditions. This now means researching a little more so I can understand and explain the significance of some customs — previously not necessary — and observing some festivals even within my own religion that I previously would not have formally recognized.

But I don't mind.

I said it at our betrothal ceremony and I'll say it again: I consider having the strength of two faiths on our side a blessing itself. As my husband joked to me the other day, it also means, "we have something to celebrate year-round because there's always something going on."

So now, after having completed a gruhapravesham puja last week, collecting palm leaves at church last Sunday, preparing to join my in-laws for Holy Thursday feast and looking forward to Puthandu festivities in a few weeks, I wish you all happy Easter.

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Peshaha appam and pal for Holy Thursday. This unleavened bread with jaggery syrup is traditionally made by Syro-Malabar Catholics for the Holy Week. It is topped with a cross made from the palm leaves received at church on Palm Sunday. Below, Puthandu feast with pongal, vazhakkai curry, kozhambu, and mango pachadi.